

Beowulf

XVI

AND the lord of earls, to each that came
with Beowulf over the briny ways,
an heirloom there at the ale-bench gave,
precious gift; and the price [footnote 1] bade pay
in gold for him whom Grendel erst
murdered, -- and fain of them more had killed,
had not wisest God their Wyrd averted,
and the man's [footnote 2] brave mood. The Maker then
ruled human kind, as here and now.

Therefore is insight always best,
and forethought of mind. How much awaits him
of lief and of loath, who long time here,
through days of warfare this world endures!

Then song and music mingled sounds
in the presence of Healfdene's head-of-armies [footnote 3]
and harping was heard with the hero-lay
as Hrothgar's singer the hall-joy woke
along the mead-seats, making his song
of that sudden raid on the sons of Finn. [footnote 4]

Healfdene's hero, Hnaef the Scylding,
was fated to fall in the Frisian slaughter. [footnote 5]
Hildeburh needed not hold in value
her enemies' honor! [footnote 6] Innocent both
were the loved ones she lost at the linden-play,
bairn and brother, they bowed to fate,
stricken by spears; 'twas a sorrowful woman!
None doubted why the daughter of Hoc
bewailed her doom when dawning came,
and under the sky she saw them lying,
kinsmen murdered, where most she had kenned
of the sweets of the world! By war were swept, too,
Finn's own liegemen, and few were left;
in the parleying-place [footnote 7] he could ply no longer
weapon, nor war could he wage on Hengest,
and rescue his remnant by right of arms
from the prince's thane. A pact he offered:
another dwelling the Danes should have,
hall and high-seat, and half the power
should fall to them in Frisian land;
and at the fee-gifts, Folcwald's son
day by day the Danes should honor,

the folk of Hengest favor with rings,
even as truly, with treasure and jewels,
 with fretted gold, as his Frisian kin
 he meant to honor in ale-hall there.
 Pact of peace they plighted further
 on both sides firmly. Finn to Hengest
 with oath, upon honor, openly promised
 that woful remnant, with wise-men's aid,
 nobly to govern, so none of the guests
by word or work should warp the treaty, [footnote 8]
 or with malice of mind bemoan themselves
 as forced to follow their fee-giver's slayer,
 lordless men, as their lot ordained.
Should Frisian, moreover, with foeman's taunt,
 that murderous hatred to mind recall,
 then edge of the sword must seal his doom.
 Oaths were given, and ancient gold
 heaped from hoard. -- The hardy Scylding,
 battle-thane best, [footnote 9] on his balefire lay.
 All on the pyre were plain to see
 the gory sark, the gilded swine-crest,
 boar of hard iron, and athelings many
 slain by the sword: at the slaughter they fell.
It was Hildeburh's hest, at Hnaef's own pyre
 the bairn of her body on brands to lay,
 his bones to burn, on the balefire placed,
 at his uncle's side. In sorrowful dirges
bewept them the woman: great wailing ascended.
Then wound up to welkin the wildest of death-fires,
roared o'er the hillock: [footnote 10] heads all were melted,
 gashes burst, and blood gushed out
from bites [footnote 11] of the body. Balefire devoured,
 greediest spirit, those spared not by war
 out of either folk: their flower was gone.

Footnotes.

1.

Man-price, wergild.

2.

Beowulf's.

3.

Hrothgar.

4.

There is no need to assume a gap in the Ms. As before about Sigemund and Heremod, so now, though at greater length, about Finn and his feud, a lay is chanted or recited; and the epic poet, counting on his readers' familiarity with the story, -- a fragment of it

still exists, -- simply gives the headings.

5.

The exact story to which this episode refers in summary is not to be determined, but the following account of it is reasonable and has good support among scholars. Finn, a Frisian chieftain, who nevertheless has a "castle" outside the Frisian border, marries Hildeburh, a Danish princess; and her brother, Hnaef, with many other Danes, pays Finn a visit. Relations between the two peoples have been strained before. Something starts the old feud anew; and the visitors are attacked in their quarters. Hnaef is killed; so is a son of Hildeburh. Many fall on both sides. Peace is patched up; a stately funeral is held; and the surviving visitors become in a way vassals or liegemen of Finn, going back with him to Frisia. So matters rest a while. Hengest is now leader of the Danes; but he is set upon revenge for his former lord, Hnaef. Probably he is killed in feud; but his clansmen, Guthlaf and Oslaf, gather at their home a force of sturdy Danes, come back to Frisia, storm Finn's stronghold, kill him, and carry back their kinswoman Hildeburh.

6.

The "enemies" must be the Frisians.

7.

Battlefield. -- Hengest is the "prince's thane," companion of Hnaef. "Folcwald's son" is Finn.

8.

That is, Finn would govern in all honor the few Danish warriors who were left, provided, of course, that none of them tried to renew the quarrel or avenge Hnaef their fallen lord. If, again, one of Finn's Frisians began a quarrel, he should die by the sword.

9.

Hnaef.

10.

The high place chosen for the funeral: see description of Beowulf's funeral-pile at the end of the poem.

11.

Wounds.